

A Communications Approach for the Potomac Heritage National Scenic Trail

by David Lillard, President
American Hiking Society
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A trip down the Potomac River, it has been written, is a journey through American history. A timeline in constant motion, the river knows equally well the Native Americans who plied the water in canoe and the modern paddlers kayaking at Great Falls, the colonial farmer and backyard gardener, the captains of canal boats and those at the Pentagon. It knows both the people who walked along it because there were no other means of travel and the people who do now because it is a favored way to enjoy the river landscapes- The first challenge of a trail named for the Potomac is to recognize them all.

For a river so celebrated and admired, there are still limited opportunities to come into close contact with it. The United States Congress recognized the river's national significance, its possibilities, and the need to bring us into contact with it. Through the National Trails System Act, the Congress challenged us to develop a Potomac Heritage Trail and make it accessible for the enjoyment of everyone while conserving its unique qualities.

Congress also recognized that the trail corridor, like the river, has different meanings for different people. So, rather than ordain an outcome for the entire trail, the legislation that established the trail creates opportunities for cooperative planning and administration. The idea is that the collaborative process will lead to local decisions that provide local benefit, but serve all Americans by conserving this nationally significant resource.

The Congress charged the [Secretary of the Interior] to administer the federal involvement in the trail, and charged the trail's proponents to cooperate on a vision that shapes what their roles and the federal role will be.

In order to pursue all avenues of cooperation, Potomac Heritage Trail partners have convened the Potomac Heritage Trail Coordinating Committee, a working group of agencies, organizations and businesses interested in the trail. The purposes of the committee are to:

- encourage information sharing among partners;
- coordinate efforts to promote the trail and conserve significant local, state and national resources in the trail corridor;
- encourage research related to trail activities, volunteerism, education about the trail corridor and its resources, and recreation on the trail;
- cooperate on efforts to realize the full potential of the trail's designation.

Goals (or, what communications & coordination ends we want to achieve by our cooperation).

- To have an informed, coordinated, passionate constituency supporting development and use of the Potomac Heritage National Scenic Trail; and
- To have the PHT Coordinating Committee be a reliable, recognized resource for PHT partners and the public.

Objectives (or. the building blocks that will help achieve our goals).

- A broad circle and vibrant community of people, agencies, businesses and organizations that know about the opportunities the PHT offers for recreation, education and commerce based on the Potomac River corridor's natural and cultural heritage;
- Effective information sharing among everyone involved in the Potomac Heritage Trail;
- The participation of local, state and federal agencies and citizens groups in the trail's development and the conservation of natural and cultural resources within its corridor;

Strategies (or. activities and actions what we will undertake that support our goals).

Organizing strategies

The fortunes of the Potomac Heritage National Scenic Trail rest with its partners. To encourage and facilitate cooperation among all PHT partners in the Potomac Basin, the Potomac Heritage Partnership has agreed to provide coordination and technical assistance. In the summer of 1997, when Virginia Trails, the Northern Virginia Planning District Commission, and others began organizing a loosely federated network — the Potomac Heritage Trail Coordinating Committee — the Partnership agreed to serve and house the committee.

It is not the intention of the Partnership to make policy regarding the trail, but to facilitate cooperation among PHT partners and to assist in coordinating planning and promotional activities. By housing the PHT Coordinating Committee, the Partnership has offered to serve as a resource for public information about the trail, a meeting place for the trail's leadership, and a forum for discussion related to the trail and the opportunities for cooperation with others interested in the heritage of the Potomac River basin. The Partnership staff are already actively assisting the PHT Coordinating Committee.

In order to attend to the broad range of activities supporting the Potomac Heritage Trail, such as inviting the participation of diverse array of interests, the PHT Coordinating Committee will form work groups as needed. The work groups may be formal or informal, depending on the evolving needs of the Committee. The initial proposed work groups are Public Policy, Communications and Outreach, and Trail Programs.

Coordination strategies

- **Collaborate on identifying projects for funding and assistance.** One of the most important ingredients for success on any multi-jurisdictional trail projects is a shared agenda among the trail's partners. For the PHT, this will mean cooperation among partners to periodically reach consensus on the most urgent needs within the corridor. This will create a spirit of community while encouraging standards of excellence in planning, development and construction. With this strategy, PHT partners will not be, or perceived to be, in competition for funding. Partners will continue to operate autonomously and, of course, will seek funding, recognition and other support for various initiatives on their own. This coordinated approach will enable partners to increase the likelihood of success for local partners by demonstrating cooperation in a nationally significant corridor. For example, a particular initiative may be cited for the visibility and further support it will generate upon success. Another project

might create a vital link that adds the continuity of two trail segments. Another might have the attention of key members of Congress who are willing to move the project forward.

- **Form a Public Policy work group and jointly pursue public policies that serve the trail and its community.** Federal, state and local land managers, public officials and elected representatives rely on the experience and opinions of citizen to make sound decisions on the use of those lands. Most often this will mean working in partnership with the agencies that manage trail segments. It may also mean educating members of Congress and their staffs about the benefits the trail provides its communities or jointly requesting funding-for the trail. These activities will be most effectively pursued through dialogue under the auspices of the PHT Coordinating Committee. To coordinate these activities, the PHT will for a Public Policy work group made up of PHT partners.
- **Invite participation from a wide range of interests** in activities surrounding the PHT corridor, whether in trail volunteerism, new business development, research and publishing, land conservation, education or merely enjoying the natural and built landscapes of the PHT corridor for exercise, transportation or pleasure.
- **Join American Hiking Society and the Partnership for the National Trails System.** American Hiking Society is national nonprofit dedicated to establishing, protecting and maintaining foot trails. Its affiliate clubs network provides resources and funding for trail projects. The Partnership is a working group of representatives of the 20 national scenic and national historic trails. It provides opportunities for networking and cooperation on issues important to all federally authorized long-distance trails.
- **Form a Trail Programs Work Group.** The story of America's trails is one written by dedicatedvolunteers. Already the PHT benefits from the support of groups like the Potomac Appalachian Trail Club (which maintains a section of trail in Virginia), the C&O Canal Association and the Potomac Water Trail Association, PHT partners will expand their involvement in trail stewardship and encourage the adoption of other sections by volunteer groups, such as the Center Hiking Club, the Hiking Club of Northern Virginia and others. In addition, these partners will encourage the formation of other trail-building and maintaining groups that support the agencies which manage the PHT.
- **Establish the PHT Business Council.** Consisting of property developers, tourism businesses and otheFinterested businesses under the coordination of the Communications and Outreach Work group, the PHT Business Council will promote the business opportunities of a protected, accessible trail; be a business voice for trail protection efforts; and support the trail by promoting participation in PHT activities to the customers of the council's member companies.
- **Public events and meetings.** Public events offer ideal opportunities to inform the public about the PHT and to recruit new volunteers and supporters. They also offer an opportunity to raise money for trail projects. One such event is the annual National Trails Day celebration, which regularly sees the staging of some 3,000 locally hosted trail events. The PHT Coordinating Committee will consider ways to make the annual National Trails Day a series of events celebrating the entire trail. The collection of activities will help to create a consciousness of the trail as a regional resource. Another successful event, created specifically for the Potomac, was the 1997 Potomac Expedition.

- **Annual Caucus.** At least once annually the PHT Coordinating Committee will host a meeting of all PHT partners and the interested public. The purpose will be to conduct such business as necessary and to ever broaden the circle of supporters in the trail.
- **Web site bulletin board and e-mail network for PHT supporters.** The Coordinating Committee will maintain a web site that serves as contact brochure for the general public. For PHT partners, the web site will also serve as a bulletin board and calendar for meeting notices, trail work parties, requests for assistance on special projects, etc. The Committee also will maintain an e-mail network to quickly disseminate urgent news and other updates.

Media Strategies

- **PHT news updates for trail partners.** Rather than create and fund an entire newsletter, **especially in the short-term**, the committee will produce a monthly **update** for distribution to partners and interested media. The ideal will be for each partner to commit to publishing the PHT Update as prepared in their own internal and external communications media. One result will be a "PHT Comer" in a few dozen newsletters and magazines, including commercial publications that become PHT partners.

The updates will cover a range of topics, especially highlighting news on cooperation among PHT partners, new trail segments, calls for volunteers, and opportunities for involvement. It will also be vehicle for the National Park Service to get news directly to the PHT support community and to solicit participation in PHT meetings, conferences, etc.

The monthly updates also will serve as a cultivation tool for regional media. While most regional media will not publish these "mat releases" verbatim, the releases will keep key journalist up-to-date on our activities.

- **PHT web site and calendar.** The PHT web site will carry the PHT Updates, existing and subsequent maps and brochures, and links to the parks and facilities of partner organizations and agencies.
- **Form a Communications and Outreach work group.** The PHT Coordinating Committee will create a Communications work group, that has regional representation. The group will have internal and external functions. Externally, members will keep the media in each member's region informed about the PHT. One method will be periodic editorial meetings with interested media. Under this scenario, we will cultivate a core of journalist by inviting them to informal briefings on trailwide and regional activities.

An internal function of work group members will be to keep the PHT's central media contact informed on matters that will be distributed via the monthly mat release.

- **Promote the PHT as a focal point for regional outdoor recreation opportunities.** This item deals less with a specific project than an approach for media. The strategy is to thematically link communities along the trail by making them part of the trail's community — in our brochures, event planning, and other activities. For example, an outdoor festival in Brunswick, Md., a walk-a-thon event on die Mt. Vernon Trail and a program of guided nature walks at River Bend Park in Great Falls, Va., all are PHT news to be shared by the entire PHT community.

Outreach strategies

- **An ongoing** series of public events or open meetings that inform and invite participation.
- Encourage voluntary, private-sector initiatives that benefit the trail corridor, such as real estate-development practices that protect its nationally significant character, conservation easements that provide access, and tourism marketing that highlights the trail.
- Encourage the private-sector production of books, maps and guides to the amenities of the trail corridor.
- Coordinate by region the activities which involve volunteers, such as trail clean-ups and maintenance

Funding the Activities of the Potomac Heritage Trail Coordinating Committee

Cooperative Agreement with the National Park Service

As provided for by applicable federal laws and accepted by precedence on other national scenic trails, the Coordinating Committee, through the Potomac Heritage Partnership, may enter into cooperative agreements with the trail's administering agency. The PHT Coordinating Committee will pursue cooperative agreements to support public information, coordination, publishing and other activities, appropriate for federal funding. The Potomac Heritage Partnership may serve as a signatory or project manager on agreements,

Other Cooperative Agreements and Challenge Cost Share Agreements

PHT partners will, of course, enter into agreements and receive funding from a variety of sources, including state and federal agencies. PHT partners, through the Coordinating Committee, will benefit from cooperatively identifying funding and other priorities for the committee as a whole.